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ABSTRACT

Teachers from a rural Pennsylvania elementary school were the focus of a 4-year (1977-1981) field-based Teacher Corps delivery system program. The school site was located 30 miles from its administrative offices and 75 miles from Pennsylvania State University. Inservice workshops held over a 2-year period identified the need for an on-site, field-based M.Ed. program. The resulting program allowed a practicing teacher to take all courses toward an M.Ed. at the school site and have such courses accepted as resident courses. Students took one course per term and could accelerate their program during the summer. Coursework was geared toward immediate classroom use. Announcement of courses was made well in advance and in a personalized, multifaceted way. Development and implementation of the model was a more time consuming process than originally expected. Standardized tests administered yearly to the teachers indicated a large percentage had negative self images of their professional capabilities and the position of their school site in the school district. Over time the scores also showed considerable growth in teacher self concept, and, in conjunction with other data, revealed improved staff communication, more satisfaction in teaching, and a greater understanding of problems of other teachers at different grade levels. (BRR)

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A paper presented at the annual meeting
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Providing Formal Class Structure On-Site for Rural Teacher Development

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This paper examines a field-based delivery system for rural teachers that enhanced intellectual growth, self-concept and staff communication. The paper describes degree of involvement of rural teachers in this field-based program, the differing needs of isolated rural teachers and a model for a rural field-based site for graduate study in education. Data was gathered over a four year period at one rural site in Pennsylvania. Results indicate that rural teachers, notoriously "under credentialed" in relation to their colleagues, are just as interested in professional growth if the site is more convenient. Demands on rural teachers appear to be qualitatively and quantitatively different.

Providing Formal Class Structure On-Site for Rural Teacher Development

Concern for rural education has grown enormously over the past five years after a long period of neglect. Most of the thrust of rural education research, however, has been aimed at compensatory or equity issues such as the revision of funding formulas, specific financial needs for rural schools, alternative delivery systems for special services, energy and rural schools, etc.

Little focus has been directed at the curriculum and teacher development in and for rural schools. Yarger and Yarger (1979) note that "federal policy and research regarding staff development in rural areas must take into consideration the inherent limitations in teacher inservice and preservice education, and related rural educational problems that could be remedied by improved staff development, and the role of both the federal government and the schools in education and social reform" (Yarger and Yarger, 1979). This paper examines a field based delivery system for rural teachers that enhanced intellectual growth, self-concept and staff communication.

Purpose

The objectives of the paper are to 1) present data on percent of involvement of rural teachers in a field based delivery system of coursework, 2) examine the differing needs of isolated rural teachers in graduate classes on-site in relation to the needs of teachers in graduate classes on campus, 3) to present a model for a rural field based site for graduate study in education.

Method

The predominant methodological approach includes descriptive and ethnographic data drawn from a Teacher Corps project during the years 1977-1981.

In the course of that project evaluation reports have been compiled by the project evaluator, documentation reports have been written, observation by the project staff has been reported and a series of on-site interviews have been conducted with rural teachers and staff.

Inservice Workshops

The inservice workshops had both positive and negative aspects in the long run. In regards to the former they served to meet pressing current needs of the teachers at the rural site. The workshops were geared toward effective problem solving and the teachers enrolled were encouraged to take the practical suggestions presented directly to their own classrooms for use.

Another positive result was that the appetite of the rural teachers was whetted for more practical assistance. They were appreciative of the personalized attention that they received and seemed to genuinely enjoy the workshops.

In crass economic terms, teachers also were remunerated. The workshops offered were free, offered as part of the Teacher Corps project on the site. The inservice credits then could be applied toward permanent certification or salary increments on the part of the teachers.

M.Ed. Program

Negative aspects grew out of these same inservice workshops when a new M.Ed. program was offered with a waiver of resident on campus status. The rural teachers anticipated that the formalized M.Ed. courses would be the same as the inservice workshops, i.e., all they had to do was show up and they would get graduate course credit. The notion that there would be required reading, examinations and papers to write was too demanding for a number of prospective students and they dropped the graduate course within two weeks.

Another difficulty was the ostensibly simple process of enrollment in the M.Ed. program (and, for some, withdrawal). The machinations of large faceless institutions are what many rural folk find repugnant about more urban life. Thus, there seemed to be a mixture of confusion, resentment and annoyance on the part of many teachers when it came to following the mandated steps for applying and enrolling for graduate school. There was confusion over whether they had already been enrolled in graduate school when they had taken inservice workshops (they had not been); there was resentment and annoyance over the form filling, the identification cards, the demand for an on campus appearance for such cards, the fee payment, the need for graduate record exams and recommendations. No one enjoys meeting these entrance requirements, but these teachers felt put upon because it was, they assumed, even more inconvenient for them. This view was coupled with a feeling of institutional abuse on the part of the geographically large school district that they were a part of whose administrative offices were located 32 miles "down the road."

Graduate Course Offerings and Enrollments

Courses offered so far (February 1982) have included a general introductory graduate curriculum course (enrollment - 24), a course in peer supervision (29), and a course in reading in the content areas (15). This from a total school staff of 60 teachers, only 12 of whom had masters degrees and 27 of whom held permanent certification. It seems that the fewer credentials on the part of a rural teaching staff is not necessarily indicative of the esteem in which rural teachers hold higher education. Given the opportunity for on-site professional degree programs, almost half the teaching staff chose to enroll.

Issues and Problems

A number of questions and issues were raised during this process of rural teacher development. Some tentative answers can be offered and there is recent research of a preliminary nature to support some conclusions. (One writer is currently surveying teacher education practices for rural specialization in 55 universities nationwide that serve large rural populations.)

The first question is obviously, "Is there a need for more inservice attention to rural schools?". The experience at this site would be clearly "yes." It should be noted, however, that this means more than a one or two day workshop. That has been the predominant mode and it is only successful in the short run. A more continuing commitment is needed to truly allow for a localized approach to educational change rather than the approach of outside consultants. Many universities have recognized this need and are attempting to revise their delivery system of courses for practicing rural teachers. Because of increased cost factors it seems that teacher training institutions must work with state departments of education in recognizing and meeting the needs of rural teachers.

Our research seems to indicate a number of characteristics of rural teachers. At our site a series of instruments were administered on a yearly basis including C. F. Kettering Climate Survey and the Purdue Opinionaire. From this data it was determined that a large percentage had negative self images of their professional capabilities and the position of their school site in the school district over time. The socres on these standardized instruments indicate considerable growth in teacher self-concept, and, taken in conjunction with the other data, also indicate improved staff communication, more satisfaction in teaching, a greater understanding of the problems of other teachers at differnet grade levels.

The site where this research was undertaken consists of two school buildings (an elementary school and a junior-senior high school) located on the same site in a rural setting approximately seventy-five miles from the University. The school site is part of a consolidated school district which has its administrative offices thirty miles "down the road."

Over a two year period inservice workshops were offered at the rural site involving approximately three-fourths of the elementary school staff. These workshops served some professional growth purposes but could not provide the work necessary to achieve a masters degree or certification requirement. Thus, a need for an on-site field based M.Ed. program was identified. Such a program was developed over a one year period of time by the College of Education in cooperation with the Graduate School at the University and the LEA.

Discussing their teaching situation with researchers, many rural teachers indicate frustration at the lack of attention they receive from their own school district and the belief that the district and state really have little interest in helping rural teachers and students meet local educational needs.

Conclusions and Implications

What then seems to prevent rural teachers from inservice growth on a larger scale? This question is the most easily answered although solutions are not as easily offered. The overwhelming difficulties in working with rural teachers on an inservice basis are a lack of time and money as well as the costly "inefficiencies" of smaller faculties and greater distances.

These factors, once recognized, should aid planners in offering alternatives to the traditional campus based setting for graduate courses in education. The demands on rural teachers are of a different qualitative and quantitative mode than their counterparts in graduate programs or in nonrural teaching settings. This reinforces the implications of the comments by Yarger and Yarger.

A number of teacher training institutions have been investigating new modes of delivery for rural teachers. These include a "weekend college" on campus, teacher centers, staff development consortia, extended M.Ed. programs and/or special inservice courses to meet identified needs of a region or school district (Nelson, 1982). The experience at Penn State and our Teacher corps site has also led us to some caveats.

Graduate courses must be of a more practical focus and should take advantage of the field setting by tieing class work directly to school teaching.

Graduate courses should be taught directly after school one day a week. For a rural community to thrive a few people have to hold a number of key positions. Teachers are usually some of the "do-er" people. These positions include school based ones such as coaching or community based ones such as board members, game warden, or volunteer rescue worker. Thus, more than one day a week may be a hardship. In addition, it seems illogical to leave the school premises only to return three hours later. Most teachers want to get classes over, then go home. The district that we work in is the largest in the state (980 square miles) so going up and back is simply not feasible for some teachers.

Most work with rural schools is on a personalized, individualized basis. Teachers and administrators know each other well and the university class should take advantage of such things. Classes should be flexible enough to incorporate the unique setting as well as to draw upon the familiarity class members already have as colleagues.

There are clearly difficulties with library materials, media resources and the natural conservation of local staffs. Many are willing to change but only if they are integrally involved with deciding the type and pace of the changes. There is ample evidence that such change must also be consonant with the community for it to be truly institutionalized.

Both the state and university involved have concerns over the meager professional library resources, but these can be augmented through purchase of materials under Title IV-B (while it lasts) and large scale borrowing by professors from their University and personal libraries. Accreditation is clearly a sticking point with inadequate library resources and it is here that concessions must be made by both university graduate schools and state departments of education.

The university should recognize that by providing such courses or programs they enhance their image, attract a number of students who would not have otherwise attended class, demonstrate flexibility and generate increased revenues.

The Penn State Model

The model of delivery at Penn State is not unique to this university, and it is a model that seems adoptable by other universities. Essentially it provides for a practicing teacher in a participating district to take all courses toward an M.Ed. at his/her own school site and have such courses be accepted as resident courses. This was done by having the Graduate School waive the "formal" residency requirement for this program.

Students take one course per term and may accelerate their program by taking courses, at their own expense, during the summer. Coursework is geared toward immediate classroom use as well as the theoretical base offered in a graduate class. Students are encouraged to find a particular thrust or focus,

early in their coursework that they can pursue for their Masters' paper and development through each particular course.

The program is administered by a faculty member who acts as advisor for almost all students and has assumed a buffering role between rural teachers and institutional procedures.

Announcement of courses must be made well in advance and done in a personalized, multifaceted way. This may seem like pampering, but many rural teachers have felt the pattern of rural neglect and need to know that they will not be "burned" again. Thus all notices must be put in teachers' mailboxes, followed by a general announcement, in person, to staff members and concluded with individual sessions that may be as short as thirty seconds, and serve to let the teacher know that he or she is wanted in class.

Development and implementation of one field site model for a masters degree program is a more time consuming process than initially was expected. This was due to, among other things, poor communication, differing needs of teachers, the difficulties of molding courses and programs to meet more generic needs, the inherent sluggishness and resistance of bureaucracies to change their expectations where flexibility is needed and geographic distance. This flexible manipulation is necessary to bring to rural schools both a sense of self worth and a more judicious view of what universities can provide for the rural teacher.

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